

***“Our voices must be heard”***

*“My name is Anke van der Vliet, I live in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam. I have been living on social welfare (minimum income) for a long time now. This is the reason why I have been slowly impoverished, in a situation where you cannot fully participate in society anymore and you become socially excluded. This situation endangers your health and - at the moment - I am no longer able to participate in the labour market. What will be my future? Living in poverty for years...”*

*This is my second experience with an event organised by the European Commission together with the country that has the Presidency of the European Union. The first was the European meeting of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion “We also participate in Europe”, organised in cooperation with the Belgian Government, during its Presidency, in December 2001.*

*It was an exciting experience, learning about the situation of people from all over Europe, the fighting spirit, the solidarity, the acknowledgement and recognition that poverty and exclusion - in whatever country it occurs - have the same effects on people. It also became clear that everywhere women and children are among the most vulnerable.*

*I participated in a workshop about income, we exchanged experiences and together we developed recommendations to be used in the final declaration:*

- *Having a sufficient income at our disposal is an essential lever to get out of poverty and social exclusion. Entitlement and access to benefits must be an unconditional right.*
- *A minimum income must meet four conditions: guarantee basic needs to all members of the family; allow choices to be made; guarantee independence also in the spending of benefits; and offer an opportunity to participate in society.*
- *Activation to work is one way, but rights and duties must be fulfilled with respect for peoples’ own choices. Moreover, activation to work is an approach that is too narrow. Engagement in volunteer work must be considered and respected.*
- *Concerning employment, there cannot be any constraints or obligation. Training and education may lead to a stable, suitable and sufficiently paid job. Volunteer work must be recognized as an instrument to promote social inclusion.*

*This conference enabled us to truly participate, we were involved in Europe, for once not excluded. This event gave us the opportunity to have our voices heard, the voices of the experts by experience with regard to poverty and social exclusion.”*

Anke van der Vliet, EAPN Netherlands  
Aarhus, 17.10.2002

The First European Meeting of People in Poverty took place on 1 and 2 December 2001 under the Belgian Presidency of the EU (1/7/2001-31/12/2001) as an initiative of Belgium's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Budget, Social Integration and Social Economy, Johan Vande Lanotte.

Most of the hundred-odd participants from the 15 EU countries were people enduring poverty and social exclusion, linked together within voluntary groups, in line with the Nice European Council's (7 to 9 December 2000) call to mobilize all actors engaged with social exclusion.

The First Meeting formed part of the inclusion process launched by the Lisbon European Council of 23 & 24 March 2000, under an open method of coordination tied into the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion.

The terms of reference were clear that:

- 🔔 Participation is a valuable addition to the other forms of democratic process which is apt to enhance both social policy-making and the empowerment of disadvantaged groups.
- 🔔 Participation needs an enabling framework: a secure and reliable environment, more regard for different ways of communicating and different entry levels, support to help overcome personal and family problems, involvement at all points from idea formulation to final evaluation.

The participants in the 1<sup>st</sup> European Meeting more specifically worked in 4 thematic workshops covering the big poverty-related issues:

- Housing
- Incomes
- Health
- Employment.

The final declaration was put across at different European levels, especially under the Belgian Presidency, by Minister Vande Lanotte, at the European Council of December 3<sup>rd</sup> in Brussels; then also, in October 2002 in Aarhus at the first European Round Table under the EU Social Exclusion Programme.

## THE HOUSING WORKSHOP

How can we talk about citizenship when we've got no housing?  
Without decent housing it is impossible to stabilise a family and develop a social activity.

The view of others is what hurts most. It is difficult to face up to the unknown. With help, I was able to formulate my applications little by little.

I have eight children ranging from 8 to 10 years old. With my family, we have been moved from pillar to post all over town. I have been evicted several times from one social housing facility to another. Eviction is frightening for me and for my children. For the last four years, I have been living in a caravan next to a busy road. At the beginning, there were no services available (refuse collection). We contracted kidney infections. We had no electricity: the children had to do their homework by the light of a candle and they have done badly at school. My mother nearly took the wrong medicine because there was not enough light to see properly. A new law came in which promised housing. We thought that we would finally have decent housing. We had a cold-water tap, refuse collection but no electricity and no shower. Two years have now gone by and we are still in the same situation without any news as to what is going to happen next. The law is a good one but the municipality is not fulfilling its obligations. For them, we are of no importance. We have no power over this situation. If we complain, we get punished. If we had housing, my children could grow up feeling proud of themselves.

Often, the mentally handicapped are placed in institutions for the elderly. That is unsuitable.

After 10 years spent living in the street, I came to the Centre to get a wash and a shave. To get off the street I had to take some unfit housing because for the other housing units, you needed a guarantor.

At the Centre, they gave me the opportunity to do some things to lend a hand around the place. They allowed me to speak. People took time with me, some longer, some shorter. Starting from zero, I have been able to get myself up to an acceptable level. Today I have some responsibilities within the Centre and I was elected to join the Board. What I really need now is a job.

Around Helsinki, there are 6,000 homeless people. When you think about people living in forests you think about men. In fact, 40% of these people are women. We try to find rooms. There is only one reception centre. We visit these people but we can't do very much for them. I am finding this all very hard to cope with. Everybody should have the right to housing.

### Workshop participants

A mixture of countries of the South and the North and with the majority of people

present being citizens facing poverty and exclusion.

### Method

During the presentations, the participants spoke about their own associations and the projects led within them and the difficulties they had encountered.

### **ANALYSIS OF HOUSING PROBLEMS**

- The dominant housing-income and income-housing link appeared directly, producing what we called the poverty trap. Without any income-housing-health-education/training link, it is impossible to get out of the poverty trap.  
The portion of the cost of rent within people's overall budgets is too high (more than 50%). In other words, higher income would allow people to have better housing. It is not possible to manage a budget which in any event is too low. Nothing changes with low income. Besides, you never calculate the costs linked to this: heating, electricity, transport.
- The size of housing units does not take account of the fact that people live their all day long.
- Most housing occupied is of poor quality which leads to extra costs in terms of heating and often results in health problems. Frequently, such housing is not maintained and becomes dilapidated; the district has a bad reputation and local businesses close down.  
Housing in a degraded environment results in social degradation and physical insecurity.
- Much social housing is to be found in the peripheral areas around towns and creates ghettos. Social exclusion is reinforced by geographic exclusion.
- Renovation and rehabilitation operations do not take into account the variety of cultural influences present within districts. Very often, these projects destroy the social fabric which existed previously.
- Housing for Travellers and all those groups living a special cultural existence must take this cultural aspect into consideration.
- Certain countries have no housing-aid policy. Others do not have a sufficient supply of housing. Others still adopt suitable measures but do not put them into practice (or do so only partially) and provide no review or control.
- For people who have lived in the street or are mentally handicapped, getting housing is a very difficult step which requires guidance and/or specific structures.

- Social workers do not always have the training or preparation which is needed to work with excluded populations.
- The organisations which accompany underprivileged populations are just as poor as they are: these groups do not receive sufficient financial support over time.

## **PARTICIPATION**

### **1 – EXPERIENCES**

#### **UNITED KINGDOM**

Further to the generalisation of a procedure of consultation between inhabitants and policy-makers, advice has been forthcoming and rents stabilised for 10 years. Tenants must request this measure in writing. The fact is that some of them cannot write and some of them have not filed their applications.

#### **FRANCE**

Specialist organisations negotiate with private properties for the purchase or rent of their properties, manage leases and accompany people facing major difficulties before, during and after the time they enter the accommodation. The emphasis is placed on mixed populations within these districts.

In a day centre for the homeless, it rapidly became evident that it was ridiculous to receive people during the day who returned to sleep under their pieces of cardboard at night. Communities were created which at the outset provided either permanent reception or transitional accommodation between the street and new housing. They are based on life-skills learning and empowerment.

#### **SWEDEN**

In a peripheral district built during the heady years of the 1960s and 70s, there is now a majority of unemployed economic immigrants who now find themselves isolated in their housing. A central venue has been opened where all those who wish to gather will meet; this is run by people from the district and a large number of activities are on offer. Thus, local politicians are invited to come and visit. Current actions include improving the environment so as to make the district a more attractive place to live.

#### **PORTUGAL**

As part of the preparations for the universal exhibition, gypsy populations were moved to a former army barracks where they are totally isolated and live a life of extreme poverty. The action carried out by cultural mediators is based on children and improving their schooling but also filters through to adults through informal interviews and works (repair, collection of refuse, etc...).

#### **IRELAND**

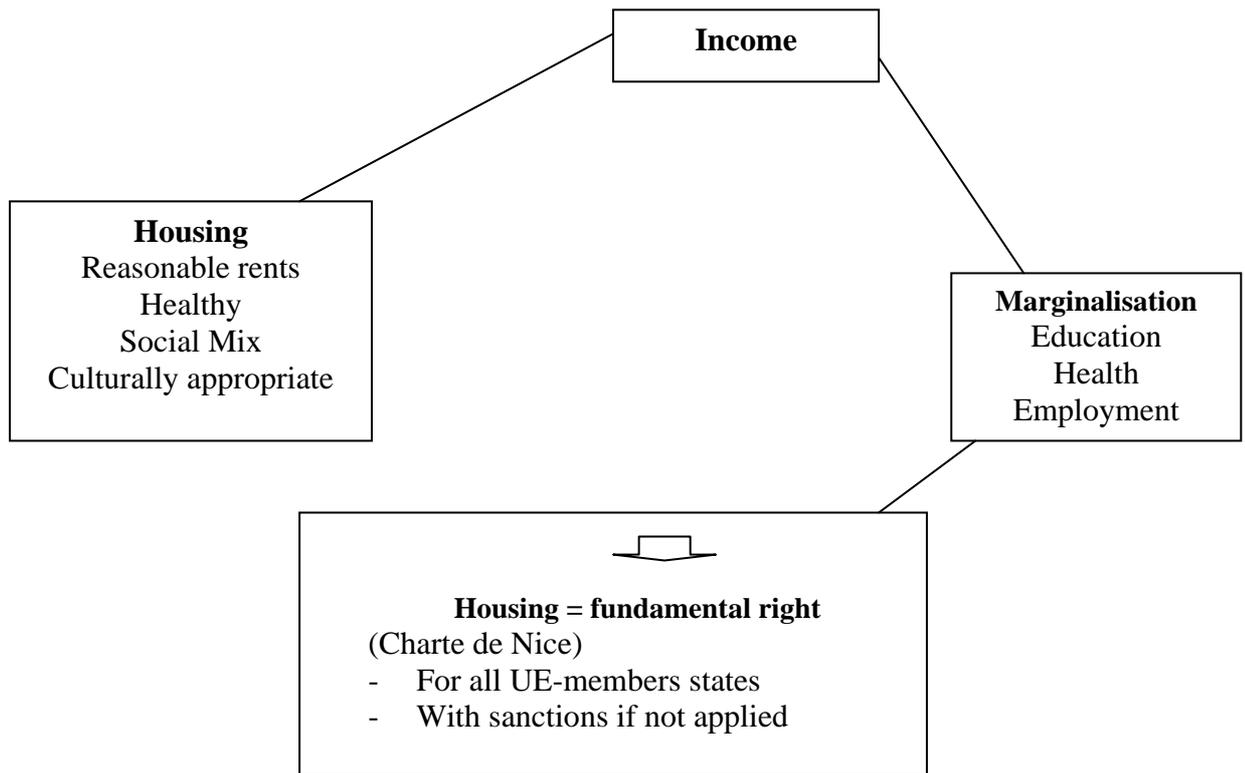
Within the consultation process (local politicians, civil servants, associations and excluded populations), the situations of people and associations are constantly becoming more fragile. Proposals are formulated in a 'take it or leave it' manner.

There is a law, but without constraint and without sanction in the case of it not being applied.

## **PROPOSALS**

Participation...

- of underprivileged people must be accompanied/supported by associations. These associations must be able to work over time with guaranteed funding and be recognised.
- must be accompanied by a commitment from all member states to initiate a participation process and should include the nomination of a politician who would act as guarantor to the process.
- supposes the setting up of structures and mechanisms which allow participation to happen. Within this framework, support and evaluation structures must be the subject of an agreement between all participants.
- requires an apprenticeship process for all parties involved which would include evaluation indicators.
- must include all underprivileged people and therefore would include refugees, asylum seekers, etc...
- must be undertaken from the very start i.e. with an analysis of poverty indicators as soon as ideas are launched with mutual respect and in an environment of trust (transparency).
- is supposed to include the availability of reliable information presented in plain language and including a definition of the limitations of the process.
- requires processes and structures responsible for review and control of the implementation of decisions taken.
- must be a constant movement where divergences are accepted.
- requires that underprivileged people have real power including amongst others, the power to make proposals.
- must be enacted by the people concerned by poverty.
- cannot be fully entered into by people not having a roof over their head.



## DEMANDS

- The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights should be strengthened. There needs to be a stronger commitment to accommodation as a basic human right.
- Housing/accommodation is more than the physical structure. Cultural diversity, environment, social mix, security... are equally important when talking about your 'home'.
- Greater coordination is needed at European level to address housing. Asylum seekers, migrants... must be supported to live in a way that respects their dignity.

## INCOME WORKSHOP

I want my children to participate in paying activities at school. I would like to be able to say 'yes' to my children.

Poverty strategies: wondering whether we can drink a hot chocolate, going everywhere on foot, not going to see the doctor, eating twice a day.

Being poor means living at the crossroads of need without receiving anything.

Statistics on poverty don't mean anything at all. You'll probably notice the figures are never the same.

Helping is more than just giving money. The hidden aspects of poverty are often more painful to bear than material problems and insufficient income. The feeling of shame, poor self-esteem and incessant stress: all that must come to an end.

The difference between earning levels is unbearable for the underprivileged.

I serve 85 hot meals a day, 200 people want them.

The poor have no choice.

If I had a decent income I would not be treated with scorn.

When we receive a pension or allowance it is too low to survive. But if we work we lose it. I would like to be part of working life but in fact I can't. I'm trapped. I'm punished and I have to stay where I am.

Having a job is not a guarantee of getting out of a situation of poverty. The poor are offered second-zone jobs of a few hours a week and with poor hourly rates, often at times when the children need to be with their parents. This is what happens in an employment market where the climate is so awful. You have four days to find a job which does not increase your income.

There is no automatic link between employment and social integration.

With insufficient income, you just can't manage because it is always too little.

The middle classes need to know what being poor is. The image that the media gives them of the poor is incorrect.

We need to put a stop to stigmatising measures.

I was offered a cleaning job where I would start work at 5 in the morning. I have 4 children. On the form, the employer wrote 'doesn't want to work'. I lost my unemployment benefit.

The poor are a burden for society. The objective is to stop paying them allowances.

As a voluntary worker, I am constantly being checked up on and may lose my allowance. They think that if I can volunteer I could have a job. If I stop my voluntary work I would feel my existence served not purpose.

### **Group participants**

From the North of Europe, participants were for the most part people living in a situation of poverty.

### **Method**

Having got to know each other, the group worked on two main questions:

- what does 'poverty' mean?
- what is a humanly decent income?

Then, after a summing up of the answers given to these two questions, the workshop looked at the theme of participation and the means that have to be implemented to achieve it.

### **Analysis of problems linked to income**

- Replacement incomes are too low to guarantee a decent living. A study carried out in Belgium compared three elements:
  - the absolute minimum income
  - a decent minimum
  - the amounts of different replacement incomes.
 All results converged and demonstrated that the scale of replacement incomes are always lower than the absolute minimum required and of course by definition, below the decent minimum.

In many countries, the amounts paid in allowances have not been revised for the past 20 years or have even been reduced.

Indebtedness and over-indebtedness are the mathematical consequence of replacement incomes being too low.

- Obtaining replacement income, allowance or aid means that beneficiaries have to be informed of the following:
  - their rights: participants denounced the lack of concern shown by the official organisations responsible for providing information in this area and the little contact they have with the target population. Furthermore, the information available is for the most part incomprehensible for somebody not familiar with administrative language.
  - the circuits to obtain these rights. Often, associations look after applicants. The fact is that in certain countries, the social fabric is very tenuous.

- The process involved in securing your rights is tough and represents a new set of reasons for someone to be stigmatised and scorned.

‘Give and take back’ mechanisms:

- maintaining an allowance is often conditional: this applies to the unemployed who have to accept employment proposals because if they refuse, they will lose their unemployment benefit.

Jobs offered to poor citizens are second-zone jobs with salaries which are practically the same as benefit, with unsociable working hours.

The work proposed does not create an increase in income: even if the salary produces a higher income, the costs associated with childcare and transport soon whittles it away.

Furthermore, access to employment often brings with it the loss of other benefits (housing benefit, for example).

- those benefiting from reduced old-age pensions or illness/invalidity pensions and who wish to work to achieve a decent level of income see their pension/compensation reduced or even revoked.
- Part-time working is on the increase, mainly for women. This type of employment does not allow people to escape poverty. Today it is wrong to think that integration in the labour market automatically resolves the problem of social exclusion. There are more and more poor workers.
- In certain countries, there are threshold ages, mainly between the ages of 16 and 18 and 21 to 25, which are not covered by the right to a replacement income.

Often the age of consent is not the same as the age of financial independence.

## **PARTICIPATION**

### **EXPERIENCES**

#### **BELGIUM**

Thanks to the introduction of the general report on poverty, a dialogue has been set up between poor people, the various administrative services and decision-makers, resulting in recommendations and the creation of a federal poverty unit. A centre has been given responsibility for getting together information providing advice to decision-makers, and producing a report every two years on the poverty situation.

Further to a study on incomes carried out by an association in consultation with excluded populations, a press campaign was organised coupled with a search for partners and participation in an exhibition organised by the unions.

The group met the minister and asked for the amounts of allowances to be increased.

A white paper was proposed suggesting an increase in the minimum revenue of 10% coupled with a reform of the law providing a stronger link between replacement income and activation (employment or training). The protests which

followed contributed to the opening up of discussions between the political and associative worlds.

#### UNITED KINGDOM

There have been a number of attempts at dialogue with local authorities which have met with varying degrees of success on an occasional basis but which remain in the shadows. Even though the excluded populations themselves have managed to gain access to these meetings, there is very little follow-up.

#### GERMANY

There is a committee in Breme which brings together experts and people experiencing poverty where new proposals for changes to the law are debated. There is also a court which is competent in the area of replacement incomes.

### PROPOSALS-DEMANDS

- Decent income
  - must guarantee basic needs are satisfied and allow family life to exist
  - must allow people choice
  - must be able to be used in an autonomous manner
  - must give people the opportunity of participating in social life
- A decent income is a right. Employment is a choice
- A job must offer a substantial increase in income
- There are too many stigmatising measures linked to obtaining and maintaining replacement incomes. The word ‘minimum’ is not acceptable. The word ‘people’ must be modified by the word ‘citizens’
- There are too many measures which seek to eliminate replacement incomes
- The image of the poor presented in the press is erroneous
- Benefit attribution must take into account the differences in situations encountered

### Working towards participation

- Poor citizens demand their rights are respected and demand the right to form associations
- Participation must be open
- We want collaboration not confrontation. This means reciprocal discussion: decision-makers cannot limit themselves to written reports – they must be exposed to the realities (i.e. What it is to live on minimum benefit)
- A debate on incomes must deal with the possibilities and means of getting beyond the survival threshold
- Discussion documents must be written in clear language
- Voluntary services constitute an added value for society and are therefore to be encouraged.

## EMPLOYMENT WORKSHOP

In the case of re-integration programmes in a single company, for the same job, people don't earn the same salary.

I haven't worked for long enough to give me the right to unemployment benefit. I'm in limbo.

I'm continuously starting again from zero: finding housing, getting my family together, looking for work for my husband.

Is forcing people to accept a job compatible with human rights law?

Re-integration programmes do not try to find suitable work for a given person.

When you refuse a job, recourse is possible, in theory at least.

We navigate between different legislations, systems and administrations. It is very difficult to know where to go next. Without the support of associations we don't get what we are due.

Women find it much more difficult to find a valid job: they are proposed part-time work, sporadic and unsociable working hours and seasonal employment.

Employment is no longer just about manual work.

The labour market doesn't take experience into account and therefore the older people have even less chance of finding something.

I left school to look after my parents and I started work. I haven't been able to gain the learning which the modern labour market requires.

I am unemployed which means I have no experience.

They take people and they recycle them. They don't integrate them.

The unions look after people who have got a job – not the unemployed or temporary workers. People working under integration contract do not join unions. They don't dare say anything. The re-integration contract is not a normal contract.

On the one hand, there is one Europe of people who try to get by. On the other, there is a Europe where there is a real economy and there are real jobs.

### Group participants

Participants were from both the South and North of Europe. The group was made up of people experiencing social exclusion and representatives of associations.

## **Method**

The debate on the theme of ‘employment’ and participation was all mixed in with the presentations – no separation was made between the two.

## **Analysis of the problems linked to employment**

We don’t simply want to survive. We have work to obtain social recognition.

### *1-Complexity*

- the large number of integration and/or training programmes is already a barrier; furthermore, measures change frequently, putting the emphasis on one or other category (young people, the over 50s,...)
- people who are excluded often change the social regime; their cases are complex and managed in a fragmented manner
- getting a job means losing benefit (housing benefit, for example)
- There are voids and gaps in the system. Unemployment benefit is linked to a previous period of work; if you don’t have enough days to your credit, you don’t get the allowance
- how do young people from underprivileged environments meet up to the challenges that face them today (languages, I.T.) when they have never had the chance to acquire these skills.

### *2-Motivation*

Having a job doesn’t mean getting out of the poverty cycle.

- jobs for the most part mean “MacJobs” or precarious or part-time work. People with these jobs do not enjoy the same recognition as normal employees
- the difference in terms of net increase in income is not necessarily substantial; furthermore, the contractual lengths of these periods of employment do not allow people to plan their lives
- training programmes do not result in ‘normal’, stable, good quality jobs. People often follow the following cycle: from unemployment to precarious employment, towards a period of illness, following a training course then back into unemployment. This type of cycle does not allow any real integration to take place.

### *3-Constraints*

- maintaining social rights is often conditional upon the person accepting a job or a training course
- job offers rarely correspond to the skills and choices of people looking for them
- constraints result in frustration and poor results: this is no good to anyone, neither the employer nor the employee
- frustrated people refuse to participate. Participation can only happen on a free and voluntary basis.

- ⇒ The starting point when discussing employment is non-employment
- ⇒ Training is seen as 'recycling' which does not lead to integration into the employment market
- ⇒ The legislations of the different countries – although very different in terms of the conditions under which replacement incomes are allocated – do increasingly converge towards punitive sanctions when people refuse employment
- ⇒ Trade union organisations are not perceived as a solution: they are based on traditional, normal employment not on temporary, part-time and second-zone jobs
- ⇒ In spite of the importance attributed to it, no training will ever create a job. Increasing access to employment requires action impacting the economic domain
- ⇒ There is a level of tension between the needs of the economic sector and the qualifications of disadvantaged populations

### Participation

- We need structures where people will listen to us
- The participation channels which exist (trade unions) do not represent the demands of the poor
- Access to employment does not constitute participation in society
- There is a relay structure in Holland (which starts at the commune level, takes in the regional level and finally comes through to national level); this council meets once a month in the commune, catering to people receiving benefit and listening to their demands
- Many structures which are theoretically sophisticated do not show any level of effectiveness in practice
- The participation approach was favoured by most: that of a service of ombudsman or mediator, bringing together competencies in the different fields (housing, income, allowances, social aid, statuses and categories, etc...), who is responsible for dealing with demands but also for analysing practical problems in an overall manner for people and formulating proposals. Total independence must be guaranteed to this service and it must be allowed to operate long-term (irrespective of political change)

- participation can only exist when real listening exists from the very outset of a process and where people are involved in the decision-making and evaluation mechanisms
- visibility of the unemployed must be improved: a newspaper, a symbolic day... In order to achieve this, people must get organised as a group
- on the basis of very different national histories, the same participation model will probably not suit everyone
- voluntary work is a social integration channel and because it is a form of training, offers possibilities of professional integration; voluntary employment must be supported because it offers the poor the opportunities to meet up, to get together and to get organised.

## **HEALTH WORKSHOP**

The excluded have a life expectancy which is 3 years less than the average.

Immigrants and refugees find it even more difficult to get health care.

An Ecuadorian gave birth in a park during the winter. The baby died and the mother was sent in prison.

Without official support, we work with 15,000 homeless people and only 3 doctors.

We cannot get health care or buy medicines.

Health problems are already present at school.

Obtaining rights is dependent upon income and the financial resources we have.

It is just too easy to put down health problems to alcoholism or drugs – to categorise it in this way. People drink because they have nothing to eat, because they are ashamed of themselves, because they have nowhere to get shelter.

In psychiatric institutions, 7 or 8 people share the same bedroom.

We are looked at as foreign beings. Before people had pity on us, now they scorn us.

If we have no support, society will suffer.

When I worked, I helped rich elderly people. When I fell ill, no one helped me.

### **Group participants**

The group was made up of representatives of countries of the South and the North and immigrants. Those facing a situation of poverty were in the majority.

### **Method**

The participants started with a brief presentation and then went on to analyse poverty through the theme of health and identified elements linked to participation.

## Analysis

- The income-health link is an obvious one. This first link is itself dependent on housing. Health in Europe consists of three layers:
  - people who can pay
  - the poor who take care not to go to doctor's too often
  - those who have nothing (refugees, immigrants and those with no papers).

The large number of refugees poses a real problem for public health in the whole of Europe, whilst at the same time presenting us with the issue of human dignity.

- The poor are generally perceived as inactive whereas in fact they spend most of their time and energy on survival.
- Alcohol and drugs, identified as the causes of poor health and mortality amongst the poor populations, gives rise to a categorisation of people which forgets to link up their situation to the problems of housing, food and income. Thus, the poor are considered as being responsible for their own situation.
- It is in the area of health that a welfare state crisis is first felt. Many countries have abandoned the field of public health and have turned it over to the private sector. The privatisation of health is already established in certain countries and is on the way in others. Privatisation of health is seen as the first stage in a development towards the privatisation of other sectors; it is already the case with pensions.
- The large number and complex nature of administrative health circuits are an indicator of the little respect shown to the poor. Access to services is humiliating and stigmatising.
- It is paradoxical that a society which has built up universal rights to health, housing, education and employment has not considered it necessary to match up these rights with universal implementation principles. It is the poor who have the greatest difficulty securing rights and benefit.
- Regrouping and participation in activities (even leisure activities) are all good preventative actions in the area of health protection.
- Mental illness receives fundamentally different treatment according to the social origin and income level of the patient: for people who have the money there is psychological accompaniment and specialists; the poor go straight to the health centre, the hospital or are interned. Also, when you have got the resources, you can get an appointment quickly, when you are poor the waiting list is always much longer.

## Participation

- all participation involves being involved from the beginning of the decision-making process as a real forum, having the proper ability to make proposals and scope for action, and not being used simply for consultation or approval
- groups and associations are essential tools and conditions to participation. In fact, in some parts of Europe it is impossible to group together. The right to create associations for immigrants and refugees must be applied throughout Europe. Being together is all the more important when you are facing a situation which is going to weaken you.
- Participative action is possible: its mission is to identify priorities and maintaining a public health system based on solidarity is one of those priorities.
- Participation requires psychological stability of which the first element is to be ensured respect and dignity. The second condition is to simplify access to rights. The third is to be guaranteed sufficient income.
- Participation requires apprenticeship and training.

**‘We also participate in Europe’  
European Meeting of Citizens Living in Poverty  
1 and 2 December 2001  
Brussels**

**Final declaration**

**FRAMEWORK**

1. At the invitation of the deputy prime minister and minister for the Budget, Social Integration and the Social Economy, Johan Vande Lanotte, and under the Belgian Presidency, we, citizens living in poverty from all the Member States of the European Union, met on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> December. Under the heading 'We also participate in Europe!' we spent two days tackling issues of participation in various areas which are crucial in the fight to escape poverty.
2. This meeting falls within the process of social inclusion started by the Lisbon European Council (23-24/03/2000) whose aim is the eradication of poverty and social exclusion by 2010.
3. One of the objectives, subsequently adopted by the Nice European Council (7-8-9/12/2000), is to mobilise all relevant bodies. It was explicitly stated thus: “To promote, according to national practice, the participation and self-expression of people suffering from exclusion, in particular with regard to their situation and the policies and measures affecting them.”
4. Participation fits in with the open method of co-ordination set up by the European Council in order to implement the policy to combat poverty and social exclusion. Its main instrument is the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion which is to be drawn up by each Member State every two years.
5. As well as the many opportunities and structures for discussion which bring together policy-makers, governments, social partners, non-governmental organisations, etc. we feel that it is important and necessary that the voice of the target group should also be heard: citizens who suffer from poverty and social exclusion.

**PARTICIPATION: ADDED VALUE**

6. Participation is a key element in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. Everybody has the right to express his or her opinion. We consider this to be a vital complement to representation in our democratic society.
7. In addition, participation also provides us with leverage to take our lives into our own hands, to get a grip on our circumstances.

8. Participation improves the standards of the decision making process itself. Decisions and measures are more appropriate to their goals. This is better for all groups in our society, but particularly for those facing social exclusion and poverty. In these cases, the problems are often spread over a range of fields and policy areas. The contribution of citizens who are themselves excluded is thus vital if fundamental improvements are to be made.

## **PARTICIPATION: CONDITIONS**

9. Poor citizens must have the right to unite.
10. Poor citizens must be recognised as experts. Policy that takes the combat of poverty seriously has to listen to poor citizens and make an agreement how this advice and expertise are incorporated into policy.
11. Setting up a participation process does not come without some obligations. To make effective participation possible, a **safe and reliable** environment must be created where we demand clarification and express our opinions. We ask for our opinions to be heard and respected. Only then can decisions be taken which are the outcome of negotiations, in which we ourselves have taken part.
12. In the setting up of a participation process, account must be taken of the differences and the individual characteristics of our lives in poverty. Account must be taken of the **differences in the ways of communicating and meeting**, just as with the **differences in the points of departure**. In order to be able to participate as full partners in negotiations or discussions, a preparatory process will often be necessary. In this respect, we must be able to obtain clear information about precisely what is expected of us and an agreement must be made about the way information is handled. We must also know in advance what the limits and scope of influence on policy are. We also need support in putting our opinions into words. This takes time and resources which need to be provided.

To be able to speak with authority, policy-makers must get to know poverty and must familiarise themselves with the problems of poverty and social exclusion through a learning process.

13. We do not stand up merely for ourselves individually, but for the **rights of the whole group** of citizens who live in poverty. Therefore we have to overcome our own problems. This can only happen if we do not have to invest all our attention and energy in our struggle for survival. To this end, individual support for our personal problems and those of our families is required.
14. Participation does not come at the end of a decision making process. Participation must begin at the stage where ideas are being developed and through implementation, review and evaluation. Such a pro-active approach will improve the quality of the decision making process and the support for it still further.

## DEMANDS

15. We therefore demand that policy-makers and those already involved in developing a policy to combat poverty and social exclusion, such as advisory bodies, social partners, non-governmental organisations, political parties, etc., in the context of this struggle that:
- a voice is given to us, citizens who are ourselves faced with poverty and social exclusion, in the whole policy-making process from the development of the policy through to its implementation, review and evaluation.
  - poor citizens and volunteer organisations receive enough financial, logistic and human resources to unite, in their own society and on a European level.
  - this involvement is implemented at a structural level via channels of participation which are more open to all, including the people directly concerned
  - training is provided for policy-makers in order to speak with authority about poverty and social exclusion.
  - there is a legal framework that enforces our right of participation.
16. We are prepared to contribute all our experience and knowledge in order that the spiral of poverty and social exclusion may be broken.

## DOMAINS IN LIFE

17. In four workshops during the Meeting of ‘ambassadors of poor citizens’, exclusion in crucial domains in life was discussed. The starting point was the story of the citizens themselves; concrete stories of life in social exclusion and poverty. On the basis of this expertise and experience and in an open and constructive discussion, conditions and proposals were examined to eradicate poverty. The result was a list of demands in different areas.
18. Concerning **housing**, it was underlined that decent housing is a human right. Access to good quality housing is only possible with sufficient income. Good housing has a stimulating influence on citizens and their environment. If there is a lack of decent housing, it creates a negative spiral of deterioration (for example health). The right to decent housing must be enforceable.
19. There is a universal right to **health**. That must be valid for all citizens. In some countries for example, citizens living in a country illegally are excluded from health care. The mechanism of solidarity in social security must be strengthened. The role of social movements is essential. The fundamental right

of association, also for groups such as, for example, immigrants must be guaranteed.

20. Having a sufficient **income** at our disposal is an essential lever to get out of poverty and social exclusion. Entitlement and access to benefits must be an unconditional right. A minimum income must meet four conditions:
- *Guarantee basic needs to all members of the family*
  - *Allow choices to be made*
  - *Guarantee independence also in the spending of benefits*
  - *Offer an opportunity to participate in society*

Activation to work is one way, but rights and duties must be fulfilled with respect for peoples' own choices. Moreover, activation to work is an approach that is too narrow. Engagement in volunteer work must be considered and respected.

21. Concerning **employment**, it has been underlined that there cannot be any constraints or obligations. The specific situation of the person involved must be taken into account (for example individual capacities, family circumstances etc.). Training and education may lead to a stable, suitable, and sufficiently paid job. Volunteer work must be recognised as an instrument to promote social inclusion. So volunteer work must be permitted and valued.

## **THE FUTURE**

22. This Meeting was a first step. If the objective to eradicate poverty by 2010 must be reached, then everyone has to take their responsibilities. Concrete initiatives must urgently be taken to eradicate exclusion in different areas. In doing so, one should remember to create space for participation. Therefore, we welcome the initiative of the Belgian Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Budget, Social Integration and Social Economy, Johan Vande Lanotte to organise a follow-up Meeting in co-operation with the European Anti Poverty Network.

## **COMMENTS OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WORKSHOP**

**These comments aim to link the inputs, analyses and demands of the participants at the 1<sup>st</sup> European Meeting with recent sociological studies of poverty and the quest for participation in society.**

The central theme of participation of poor citizens can be reformulated into bipolar current:

- each citizen as a sovereign entity has the right to economic and social conditions which respect his dignity and allow him to exercise his political rights to the full.
- how can we maintain or restore social links in societies based on the sovereignty of the individual?<sup>1</sup>

## **CITIZENSHIP**

**This term was co-opted at the Meeting as signifying that the “city” includes the poor. It refers neither to political rights nor nationality, but to a status of full human dignity.**

The experience of social inequality was a central theme throughout the meeting and is illustrative of the fundamental problem of dealing with the theme of social participation with excluded populations head on. And yet, social participation is the founding utopia of any democracy i.e. the ambition to construct a political order which turns the social order upside down by affirming civil, legal and political equality for all people, even though their backgrounds are different (origins or beliefs) and unequal (social conditions and skills).

More specifically, the participants spoke of:

- inequality in terms of understanding of the law
- inequality in their ability to obtain rights
- inequality because of income levels
- inequality in the exercising of freedom
- inequality in the treatment of people
- inequality in the recognition of minority populations

This is not a recent observation: in 1794 Condorcet said: *‘moving through the history of societies we have had the occasion to show that very often there is a big gap between the rights which the law allows to citizens and the rights which they really have; between the equality which is established by political institutions and that which exists between individuals: we have noted that this difference has been one of the main causes of the loss of freedoms in ancient republics, of the storms that have*

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<sup>1</sup> *La démocratie providentielle* (Welfare democracy), Dominique Schnapper – Gallimard

*overcome them and the weaknesses that have delivered them to foreign tyrants.'*

Even though the pursuance of the utopian ideal of equality has undeniably led to social progress, it is equally clear that we are still chasing after the dream: in 1979, the European court of human rights stated that it 'intended to provide the individual with the material conditions required to exercising his or her freedom'<sup>2</sup>

Social development is a long-term process: indeed, a century and a half separates the declaration of freedom rights (France 1789) and those of credit rights and social rights (after the second world war).

Until the 1990s, all analyses converged towards the observation that civil, economic and social rights are not only the conditions of the exercising of citizenship, they have become veritable political rights.

One of the participants in the housing workshop asked: 'How can we talk about citizenship when we've got no housing? Without decent housing it is impossible to stabilise a family and develop a social activity.'

However, over the past 10 years, *those offering theories on European citizenship and those offering theories on economic and social citizenship have both criticised national and political citizenship and proposed the basis of society as being designed not as a historic and political community but as an organisation for the production and redistribution of wealth in the name of shared values (...). Partners would no longer be united by a political-type contract but through their participation in economic and social life.*<sup>3</sup>

This reference is to be compared to a comment made during the employment workshop: 'On the one hand, there is one Europe of people who try to get by. On the other, there is a Europe where there is a real economy and there are real jobs.'

It is probably not a coincidence that the participants in the 'income' workshop demanded a change to the title of the meeting: for them, we should be talking about citizens and not about people.

To achieve citizenship, the founding element designated is the guarantee of a decent income which gives people access to housing.

Those who face such difficulties obtaining social rights provide the evidence which is confirmed by sociological analyses: credit rights (social, economic and cultural rights) affect people's political rights.

*Sovereignty of the individual as a citizen gives him the right to an existence which is just to be 'normal' – even more so with the progress made in the efficiency of economic production and its positive impact on the collective wealth. Modern society is organised around material prosperity and the quest for private happiness. The link between citizenship and economic conditions of people's existence characterises*

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<sup>2</sup> A number of national constitutions include the same statement (France, 1946, preamble to the constitution, affirmation of the legitimacy of social rights. Spain, article 9.2 of the constitution. Italy, article 3.2 of the constitution.)

<sup>3</sup> *La démocratie providentielle* (Welfare democracy), op cit. cit.

*modern citizenship.*<sup>4</sup>

## COMPLEXIFICATION

*The social state which has become one of the main sources of social identity is constantly creating new categories of beneficiaries and increasing the quantity of its interventions, creating successive sedimentations. It is as if you can simply bolt on new rights and new categories.*

*(...) But at the same time, by attempting to make social conditions more equal, the welfare state creates new forms of inequality which are linked to people's relationship with social protection.*

The search for equality has moved progressively through the definition of criteria and as a result, the inclusion or exclusion of new categories.

Today, the beneficiaries of social policies in their day-to-day lives suffer for the most part from being perceived not as due recipients of welfare but as beggars, with an internal hierarchy based on the benefit hierarchy system.

The unemployed person does not dare to adopt the legitimate behaviour of a pensioner who can do the gardening or watch the television in the afternoon<sup>5</sup> with a clear conscience.

Trying to fit everyone into the system has created categories which contribute to differentiation and stigmatisation.

*De facto*, the implementation of successive and super-imposed social policies, the increased speed of change of reforms and tinkering with the way people are categorised brings to light inconsistencies, presenting reversals and stopping and starting that poor citizens suffer as additional obstacles to obtaining legitimate recognition of rights and obtaining the benefits linked to them.

Furthermore, recent years have seen the emergence of a sense of humiliation experienced by the poor and that certain workshops referred to in terms of 'image', both in the media and in society. *The poor of the welfare democracy are objectively less poor than the poor of the past but they are more humiliated to the extent that each of them is responsible for his or her own destiny. Temporary workers are also objectively in a less precarious situation than the temporary workers of the past but they risk greater humiliation. It is for this reason that low professional integration is closely linked to difficulties in relations within the family, to a reduced social life and inferior participation in all forms of life in the cities*<sup>6</sup>.

*It is impossible not to look at the concomitance between the modifications which have occurred in professional careers and those of family and emotional life. (...) whilst neurosis was the pathology of guilt faced with transgression and wrong, depression is described as the illness of insufficiency, void and inability to act in a society which (...) over-evaluates action.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *La démocratie providentielle* (Welfare democracy), op cit. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Guillemard, 1972

<sup>6</sup> *La démocratie providentielle* (Welfare democracy), op cit. cit.

<sup>7</sup> *La crépuscule du social* (Night falls on social welfare), Vrancken, Labor 2002

During the four workshops, all representatives analysed poverty as being multi-dimensional in nature, and put a specific emphasis on the reciprocal link between housing and income which was considered unanimously as the area needing most attention.

However, participants did use specific terminology. They talked about ‘the poverty trap’, whilst researchers use the word ‘spiral’ or ‘vicious circle’.

The image of the circle or spiral does however present the possibility – albeit small – of getting out of it, of breaking the circle, and portrays the idea of movement (an ascending or descending spiral).

The word ‘trapped’ brings in a notion of enclosure and closed space.

The way those concerned analyse exclusion is referred to as a state of permanence and not as a passing phase or transitory state awaiting better times ahead.

*We can suggest that paradoxically, this desire to support (...) employment by an increase in subsidised solutions has very substantially contributed to targeting the weakest and made them weaker. (...) In clear terms, the best qualified are the first to benefit from the mechanisms on offer.*<sup>8</sup>

Movements and changes experienced by poor citizens does not necessarily mean improvement but is to do with two myths:

- The myth of Sisyphus:
  - ‘I must continually start again from the bottom’: the many modifications of status bring the excluded from one administration to another with, at each stage, changes which result in delays in benefit payment, placing of children in care, the termination of rights to benefit’
  - ‘Training and temporary employment is not integration, it’s recycling’
  - ‘I cannot change I must stay who I am, I am being punished’.
- The myth of Tantalus:
  - It is impossible to stabilise a family with temporary employment
  - Inequality of means of existence reinforces injustice
  - MacJobs or part-time jobs do not give you any way out
  - Integration programme jobs do not give the employee the same status (or salary) as normal jobs.

*"Having obtained political equality, the most natural desire and the most active approach is to obtain equality in fact as well as in law. (...) Without this hope, equality would be no more than a cruel illusion which, instead of giving the fulfilment it has promised, only attributes Tantalus' torment to the largest number and most useful section of society"*<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> *La crépuscule du social (Night falls on social welfare)*, Vrancken, Labor 2002

<sup>9</sup> Gauchet quoting Harmand, 1979

New activation measures contribute to blurring the lines between social policies governing the distribution of universal social rights and specific social aid. (...) In such a framework, the new myth refers the unemployed to their own responsibilities and their own life choices. It is for them that everything must be done to maintain employability with the hope of a hypothetical return to employment in a dignified manner.<sup>10</sup>

Further, the (economic) crisis has revealed to the poor that the established social partners can no longer be considered allies.

In the 'Employment' workshop, the low concern of the trade union movement for those excluded from employment or those working in the second employment zone was highlighted. In the employment sector, poor citizens meet a lack of spokesperson or mediator to speak on their behalf.

This lack of interest on the part of the social partners is also identified in the document entitled 'Follow-up by EAPN of national action plans on inclusion' of June, 2002.

In general, the excluded find help and support from a very diverse set of associations; but with some considerable insight, they observe that the associations are themselves very fragile.

*(...) The fragility of the social sector is demonstrated by an increasing precariousness of social workers and their employment contracts. Now, that really is a strange situation: being in charge of missions seeking to achieve re-integration through employment, helping the most under-privileged, recreating social and citizens' involvement when the social workers themselves are experiencing some of the same difficulties in their own careers as those experienced by their clients!<sup>11</sup>*

## **WORKING TOWARDS PARTICIPATION**

During exchanges in the four workshops, two models of participation can probably be linked up to two historical interpretations of citizenship.

1 – The Anglo-Saxon type: different social groups are represented in the political arena on account of their specificity and, by defending their own interests, they contribute to the general good and to the proper functioning of society as a whole. This type of democracy gives rise to orders, corps, classes and particular groups: participation is organised in groups.

It is therefore from those countries which have this or similar traditions that we have experience of councils, pressure groups, public demonstrations and visibility of excluded groups.

2 – The 'French Revolution' type of citizenship is a direct expression of general desires and is independent of all intermediate links and in direct and close relation

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<sup>10</sup> *La crépuscule du social (Night falls on social welfare)*, Vrancken, Labor 2002

<sup>11</sup> *La crépuscule du social (Night falls on social welfare)*, Vrancken, Labor 2002

with the State. The interests and desire of each citizen is part of the collective desire and interest. The public interest cannot be deduced from the sum or components of individual interests.

The interests and desires of each citizen are identified by the collective desire and interest. Thus, in the employment workshop, one participant declared that a job that was suitable for one person would benefit everyone: the employer and the employee and, as a result, society as a whole.

This context gives rise to suggestions of having ombudsmen, mediators and close participative interfaces, where poor citizens are present on an equal footing and are constantly active from the beginning of the process right through to evaluation and where major political personalities are also involved.

## CONCLUSION

*Critique and crisis are both derived from the same etymological root, referring to categories of discernment, choice, decision and judgement. By extension, they also refer to conflict, dispute and contention (...).*

*The lot of any democratic society would be to set up a symposium of internal critiques and allow them to exist together<sup>12</sup>*

This first meeting is to be welcomed as a first instalment, because it has allowed poor citizens and political representatives to meet up.

The theme of participation referring to the utopia of democracy naturally gave rise to criticisms and comments of remarkable pertinence.

They allowed us to keep in mind the fact that in spite of recent changes, the social state is still at work in numerous redistribution policies and that the current economic crisis has not compromised all previous achievements.

They have pinpointed the fact that in a fairly complex social landscape, poor citizens are aware of at least three types of references:

- *deep references*: social, economic and cultural rights linked to political rights
- *modified references*: access to employment, training required, the identity between employment and integration
- *vague and changing references*: the tendency towards the privatisation of social sectors, political change (such as the impact on the end of Communism on immigration and the influx of refugees).

The findings of these sessions put the emphasis on the specific needs of support, respect and transparency that all poor citizens demand but also allow us to rely in the future on this population's ability to debate, on their skills and on their desire to collaborate, which may represent a major resource in the quest for greater equality.

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<sup>12</sup> *La crépuscule du social (Night falls on social welfare)*, Vrancken, Labor 2002

*I don't worry about the question 'Mummy, why are we alive?' but of course I do pay attention to the question 'Mummy, how can we live together better?'. This may not seem particularly profound, but a good answer to this question would be much more useful.<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> Chokri Mahasinne, "Wereldwijd Magazine"

**FIRST MEETING OF CITIZENS LIVING IN A SITUATION OF POVERTY  
BRUSSELS – December 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> 2001**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction

Framework text

Housing workshop

Income workshop

Employment workshop

Health workshop

Final text

Analysis

Annexes      List of addresses

                 Photos